

# Asymmetry in Persian Symmetrical Art and Architecture

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*“Rose petals let us scatter  
And fill the cup with red wine  
The firmament let us shatter  
And come with new design”* (Hafez 14<sup>th</sup>. century)

## Abstract

Since ancient times, the integration of asymmetry in the design of composition has been a common practice in Iranian art and architecture in order to avoid problems such as topography and winds, and/or to comply with cultural and religious believes. This is manifested in mosques where the Mehrabs are<sup>1</sup> turned to the Qebla<sup>2</sup> to face in the direction of Mecca; in some entrances of mosques, public bath houses, or houses, in order to provide more privacy for the users; in town planning of large cities, in order to emphasize the old existing Friday mosques, or to avoid the direct access to a castle or governmental building; in the design of staircases, wind catchers, or in water distribution system; and in decorations such as tiling and miniatures.

## The Art of Asymmetry in the Core of Symmetrical Art and Architecture

Islamic architecture derives its characteristic from geometrical symmetry (In this article, Islamic art and architecture refers to the work that was created between 800-1600 AD, and does not necessarily refer to religious architecture and related work).

Designers in Iran have been deeply influenced by the long established traditional rules of symmetry. Nevertheless, when the need arose, these same designers did not hesitate to solve some architectural problems by introducing asymmetrical elements to create a new composition that is harmonious in design.

The city of Isfahan which is located in the center of Iran is an outstanding example of harmony between symmetrical and asymmetrical design.

The *Maydan-e Naghsh-e- Jahan*, an important square in Isfahan with its multifunctional role, is an example of harmonious symmetrical design. As expansion of the square had become necessary, the designers used asymmetrical elements to create a functional design attaching the new buildings to the

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1 The Mehrab marks the Quebla,s direction inside the mosques

2 The Qebla is the direction toward Mecca, which is the direction the worshippers face during prayers

Maydan. *Masjideh Shah* (Shah Mosque), being rotated 45 degree to face the Mecca's direction, is attached to the Maydan by using this method.

The Bazaar in Isfahan, located near the Maydan, was originally a symmetrical composition both in plan and section. However, as the city grew around it, the new structures intersected the bazaar modifying the existing symmetry. These structures were carefully designed making the transition a smooth one, and the final composition a pleasing design.



**Figure 1,** *AliGhapoo*  
Photographer: Talin Der  
Georgian, 2000



**Figure 2,** *Masjideh Shah*  
Photographer: Tim Bradley  
Aga Khan Archive, 1996



**Figure 3,** *Masjideh Sheikh Lotfolah*  
Photographer: Justin Fitzhugh 1996

In the end, these amazing asymmetrical details that modified the symmetrical designs not only added to, but preserved, the beauty of the structures.

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